Rex Glass and the Factory Reset

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Rex Glass and the Factory Reset

by aibari

Summary

After a mission goes disastrously wrong, Dark Matters agent Rex Glass is put on desk duty and a long-term assessment plan to make sure he has not been compromised. He spends his days buried in paperwork and bad dreams until he runs into detective Juno Steel at his local coffee shop. While their last meeting was unremarkable and ended in failure, Rex can't shake the feeling that there is something more to Steel – something worth coming back for.

Notes

This fic is a part of the Penumbra Minibang 2019/20, and I'm super excited to share it with you!

The artist for this fic is the lovely and very patient @captaincravatthecapricious over on tumblr - please check them out, they are a treasure!

The betaing of this one is by Princess_Aleera - bb ur my angle <3

See the end of the work for more notes

ENCOUNTER

For Rex Glass, every day at Dark Matters was the same.

He woke up. He showered and prepared himself for the rest of the day. He put on a perfectly tailored suit. He went to his mandated daily assessment

and additional therapy at the Dark Matters Assessment Center, and afterwards, he spent the rest of the day shackled to his desk, only taking a break around lunchtime to grab a coffee at a nearby coffee shop. After work, he went home, ate a Lean Protein Cuisine for One dinner, and went to bed.

It was pointless, dreary paperwork all the way down.

He could vaguely remember things being different before the accident and his subsequent stay at Infirmary 5. It was all a bit hazy, but he could still recall there being a bit more *action.*

So far, this day had been just the same as every other. The daily assessment and therapy session had mostly consisted of Rex describing his dreams, or what little he could remember of them. They had been chaotic and nonsensical, never quite resolving into anything concrete, and there was nothing even *remotely* interesting about them, no matter how bright-eyed and laser focused doctor Gold's face had become when he described them.

And now … Rex eyed the stacks of paper that threatened to overtake his desk. Every sheet was so covered in highhider fluid that they were more blank than not to anyone without the right level of clearance.

As he was still on probation, Rex did not have anywhere *near* the right level of clearance. He picked a file at random and opened it with an irritated flick of the wrist. The title was there, which was a start. The rest of the page, as well as most of every other page of the file, remained stubbornly blank.

They were meant to, of course. Probation was about recovery, but it was also a test.

Knowing why he had been assigned the task did not make it any less frustrating.

Still, he could work with what he had been given. Gather the information scattered at the shores of that white, highhider sea and *extrapolate.* Weave the pieces together, reorder them into making sense. Do it well enough to impress, but not so well that his superiors would suspect that someone might be feeding him information he was not privy to. It was a tough needle to thread, but he was nothing if not an excellent tailor.

Dark Matters had hired him for a reason, after all.

He just had to prove to them that that reason was still there.

-

Scanned with CamScanner

-

Lunch caught him by surprise.

He had spent the morning carefully piecing his way through the first three pages of the file. It had been surprisingly interesting, so far. Unlike the mission reports and classified personnel files that usually crossed his desk, this appeared to be an unpublished draft of some kind of academic article.

Rex was still thinking about it as he stepped out into the street, dodging through the throng of people on autopilot. He had been unable to piece together the article's central argument, but whatever it was, it had to do with Ancient Martian artefacts. Something about ... eggs, and purification.

Not the *clearest* lead, but still a promising start.

He ducked past a couple that were arguing loudly into their separate comms on their way out of The Emerald Bough, slipping in through the door before it could close behind them.

Inside, the lunch rush was winding down.

The menu over the counter listed the day's specials. Rex lost himself, staring a little too intently at the listings for EGG HYPERTOAST and HYDROPONIC OMELET, thinking a little too hard about that article, the frustrating half-shape of something he couldn't quite work out, snagging like a badly tended nail –

Then his eyes slid down to the register, and everything ground to a halt.

There was a man at the counter. He was wearing a trench coat, and something about him was vaguely familiar.

As Rex watched, he ordered a coffee (black, five sugars) and stepped to the side, checking his comms. His hands were broad; his nails were painted a purple so dark it was almost black. He tapped a finger against his lower lip, seemingly lost in thought.

His mouth looked soft.

Rex tore his gaze away and got in line.

Fold it away.

As he waited, his mind drifted back to the article. Ancient Martians, purification, egg-shaped artefacts … there was something about it that felt ... not *wrong*. But not *right*, either. The shape of it refused to resolve into a satisfactory pattern.

Rex ordered a coffee (black), still lost in thought. The barista gave him a steaming cup and a bright, company mandated smile.

When he turned to leave, there was a body in the way. Rather than step out of the way, Rex stepped *into* -

The man from earlier, too close and covered in Rex' coffee.

I was going to drink that, Rex thought, distantly.

"Oh, I am *so* sorry," he said. The words sounded genuine enough, but when he reached for the mild mortification he should have been feeling, he found nothing. It was as though the space in him that should have contained emotion had been replaced by some vast and unknowable void; a sea of highhider fluid set to a key for which he did not have the right level of clearance.

He blinked.

Fold it away.

The man was staring at him, mouth half open in surprise. Rex fished a napkin from a nearby table and patted inefficiently at his chest, where the coffee was soaking into his fortunately cheap t-shirt.

"I hope it didn't scald you," Rex said. The man blinked up at him. His eye was dark like the space between stars, and there was a ... *softness* there that caught Rex off guard.

"*Nur* - " the man began, and then stopped himself. He swallowed. "Agent Glass."

A memory unfurled in Rex' mind, slow like honey and tinged with static.

There had been a mission at the Kanagawa mansion involving the death mask of Grimpotheuthis. It had happened a while ago – perhaps a year or so. The mask had been remarkable for its construction as well as its lethality; he had been ecstatic at the chance to see it.

In the end, he had not been able to prevent it from being stolen.

And then there had been ... something else. Some*one* else, crouching halfway out of an office window and griping.

Someone initially intriguing but ultimately … disappointing. Not worth the effort.

Unremarkable.

Juno Steel.

That was it.

He couldn't remember much about him. Meeting him had been ... trivial, compared to the disappointment of losing the mask.

“Juno Steel,” he said. The name felt more familiar on his tongue than it should, like his mouth remembered the man better than his mind.

“Yeah,” Steel said. He looked away and then back again. “Listen, Glass, I … I'm sorry for how things shook out.”

The way he said it was so … *emotional,* so full of shame, as though he had been a central part of the mission, a core component in its failure. The naked vulnerability in his voice sent an unpleasant shiver down Rex' spine, raw and bloody like an open wound.

It was just so *unnecessary.*

Really, the loss of the mask had been no-one's fault but Rex.

“There is nothing to be sorry for,” he said, and gave Steel a blithe smile. “We all make mistakes, after all.”

Steel stiffened under his hands. The napkins were soaked through with coffee and starting to disintegrate into the fabric of his t-shirt. Somewhere along the course of the conversation, Rex had forgotten what his hands were doing, and now they were both paying for it; Steel with his shirt, and Rex with his dignity.

Well.

Both with their dignity, after that display.

“Yeah,” Steel said. He sounded a little choked. “I guess we do.”

Then he moved away.

It seemed to take him seconds to navigate through the crowd and out into the street, and then he was gone.

-

Rex got a second cup of coffee, and then he got back to work.

The rest of the afternoon passed mostly uneventfully. Despite his best efforts, the article remained stubbornly opaque. He chased down a number of leads that lead to brick walls; he cross-referenced several databases for any mention of Ancient Martians and eggs, but found little of note. He suspected that the databases had been scrubbed, though he couldn't say why. It seemed like a lot of effort to go through for little gain, as far as he could see.

Then again, Dark Matters was not known for *restraint.* If there was something that they deemed *too dangerous,* for example, for the general public to know …

Well. That would be very interesting.

-

Later, back home in his apartment, he heated up his daily Lean Protein Cuisine dinner. He ate it standing in his tiny designer kitchen, staring at the wall, barely noticing the taste. His hands still smelled faintly of coffee; now that there was nothing to stop him from thinking about it, the sense-memory of touching Juno and his terrible, wet t-shirt welled up in his mind. It made his palms itch.

Fold it away, he thought. He stabbed the last of his pasta with his fork.

Juno – *Steel* – had been warmer than Rex would have thought he'd be. Really, it was -

Fold it away, he told himself, more strongly this time.

The thoughts refused to stay folded.

Rex jammed his hands into his pockets, hoping for some kind of distraction. His fingers brushed against an office stapler, a highhider stick, a –

A pen?

He pulled it out. It was a cheap, black ballpoint. Practically ancient. Not really something one would expect to find in the Dark Matters

building.

Which meant (something twisted in his gut) that it was likely Juno's. Steel's.

Rex stared at it.

The plastic was cool against his fingers.

Juno Steel had held this pen, too. Maybe he had even used it earlier today, before Rex had liberated it from him. Juno's fingers –

Rex shuddered and sat down heavily on the couch. His apartment seemed suddenly impossibly quiet, so empty it made his ears ring.

He closed his eyes.

He folded it away.

ASSESSMENT

Chapter Summary

Rex gets a check-up.

His dreams were full of static like pins and needles, digging into his skin and skull and brain. There were hands, warm and open hands that touched him with a gentleness he had not earned, could never –

There were hands in them, and faces without faces, glaring down at him in a room that was white white white and cold with metal, cold with blood –

There was running running running down a featureless hallway, and it did not end and it did not end and –

The room was dark, and someone was saying his name like no-one said his name, and –

He woke up. He stared blankly at the ceiling. He folded it away.

-

Doctor Athena Gold met him in the lobby of the Dark Matters Assessment Center. The atrium was large and airy. Sleek silver beams supported the spiraling, fractal glass panels that made up the ceiling, throwing all sounds echoing back down to the white marble floors. The overall effect was elegant, if somewhat cliché.

Doctor Gold was elegant, too. She wore a cream-colored coat that tapered gently at the waist, along with a pair of flowing, rose-colored slacks. Her stiletto heels might double as knives in a pinch; Rex was not about to find out.

"Agent Glass," Doctor Gold said, all business and no pleasure. "Welcome back."

"Pleasure," said Rex, and smiled. They walked together to Doctor Gold's office. It was small, but the interior, at least, was cutting edge, including the wall that was not-so-secretly a one-way window. Doctor Gold made him sit in the patient's chair, ignoring his attempts at small talk as she smeared gel on his face and neck.

"Take off your shirt," she said, monotone.

"Why, Doctor," said Rex, already unbuttoning it and sliding it off his shoulders. "I thought you'd never ask."

"Hm," said Doctor Gold, and began to smear the gel on his torso. Did she ever smile? Had this woman ever in her life shared a laugh with another human being? Surely not.

"You know, Doctor," Rex said, as she began to stick electrode pads over the gel. "One of these days I'll get a laugh out of you."

"Sure," said the doctor. Her face was as devoid of life as any Martian desert.

Once the electrodes were in place, Doctor Gold began running through her daily questionnaire. He answered her questions without too much consideration. What had he eaten for dinner last night? Had he eaten breakfast? Had he been experiencing any headaches or nausea since yesterday? How about nosebleeds?

Just simple diagnostics, soothing in their banality.

Then she asked him about the dreams.

For a bright, awful second, he could *see* them, a hundred hands that belonged to people without faces, a thousand endless, looping corridors.

It was only a second.

He stared up at the smooth, white ceiling. It was absolutely perfect, with no crack or flaw in sight. That was part of Dark Matters regulations, he supposed. They generally found any cracks, whether actual or metaphorical, to be a safety risk. In any other organization, it might have been easier to call that particular attitude paranoia, but then, Dark Matters was not just *any* organization.

When Rex spoke, his voice was perfectly neutral. Yes, he was still having the dreams. No, he could not make sense of them, beyond the image of running down a hallway and the impression of disembodied hands. Yes, they left him with his heart beating in his throat, short of breath, but really, it was no more harrowing than a brisk run might be. Yes, sometimes they did leave him a little unsettled.

"You know how it is," he said. "Trauma, and all that."

Doctor Gold levelled an even stare at him.

"Don't take it too lightly, Agent Glass," she said, as she began to unstick the electrodes from his skin. "The mind is a delicate machine."

He thought about hands and hands and running.

"Delicate, indeed," he said lightly, and took the towel she offered him to rub at the places where the drying gel still stuck to him. He forced his hands not to shake. "You always know just how to put it, Doctor Gold."

-

He read reports and collated potentially useful information, annotated margins and circled words. Nothing was out of the ordinary, but he still felt as though something in him had been knocked off-balance. His attention kept slipping; he found himself staring at blank parts of the page for minutes without noticing. His office was as large and airy as the Assessment Center lobby, and so empty that his breathing seemed to echo against the polished stone walls, the sound redoubling and twisting in on itself until it was all he could hear, until his head was splitting with it, until it began to sound as though it was made up of urgent, sharp whispering, and there were faceless people crowding in on him in a white room, straining to make the first cut –

He rubbed at his eyes, not bothering to take his glasses off first, and sighed.

“*Wonderful*,” he muttered.

There was no-one else there to answer him, of course. Other than his breathing, there was no sound at all.

“Very well,” he said, a little louder, attempting to summon some degree of jauntiness. “I will *not* lose to neo-businessian architecture.”

He took a deep breath and returned to his files.

-

The Emerald Bough was bustling with people when he stopped by for lunch. Everywhere he looked, there was someone leaning against the holo-green walls or resting their elbows on the kitschy, faux Ancient Martian tables, murmuring to their friends or yelling across the room, drinking coffee and eating whatever health-conscious pre-fabricated pastry the place was selling today.

Juno Steel was nowhere to be seen.

There was no reason for him to be here, of course. Rex had gone here every day for weeks until the day he had (quite literally) stumbled upon him. There was no real reason that he should be here now, and he doubted their last encounter had given him much encouragement to come back.

Still.

The thought of seeing him again – of *not* seeing him – made Rex' hands itch.

He wasn't sure what that meant, exactly, but he found that, entirely without his permission, his fingers were tapping restlessly against the lining of his pockets.

None of that, he thought. Carefully, he pulled his hands free, shaking the itch out of them with as much elegance as he could muster. Somewhere to his left, a woman laughed at something her companion had said, loud enough to turn the heads of half the people in the room.

Rex straightened his suit jacket and melted into the crowd.

He did not do it entirely on purpose, but it felt comforting all the same, being just another stranger among many, letting himself be swallowed up by the crowd like a wave. He lingered at the edges of the room, watching people move and talk and drink their coffee, until the lunch rush began to die down.

There was still no sign of –

Well, that was fine.

There had been no reason to expect him to show up, after all.

Rex stepped out of what remained of the crowd. He made his way to the counter. He bought a cup of coffee, black.

BLEED

Chapter Summary

Rex plays hooky.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Days passed one after another, dishwater pearls on a steel string. Rex made decent headway on the Ancient Martian artefact reports. He had barely managed to scratch the surface when it came to the elusive Professor Miasma, but he was nothing if not patient.

In fact, aside from the ringing emptiness of the office, work was largely pleasant. At times, it was even *fun,* the sort of fussy detail-work that took a long time and demanded one's full concentration. Rex reveled in the way it swallowed him up.

It was a good distraction from the dreams.

The dreams, which were not getting better. If anything, they were getting worse, twisting at the corners and distorting like melting plastic. They left him feeling numb and not quite himself, wrung out and shaking, staring at the ceiling. A hologram superimposed on a hollow shell; a simulacrum of a simulacrum.

Empty, as though some bright spark had gone missing.

Worse.

Lonely, as though his own company was no longer enough.

Maybe it had never been enough.

It was pathetic enough to make one sick.

-

He was standing in line at the café, immersed in thoughts of the Egg of Purus and blending in with the people around him, when someone stepped up behind him and put a hand on his shoulder.

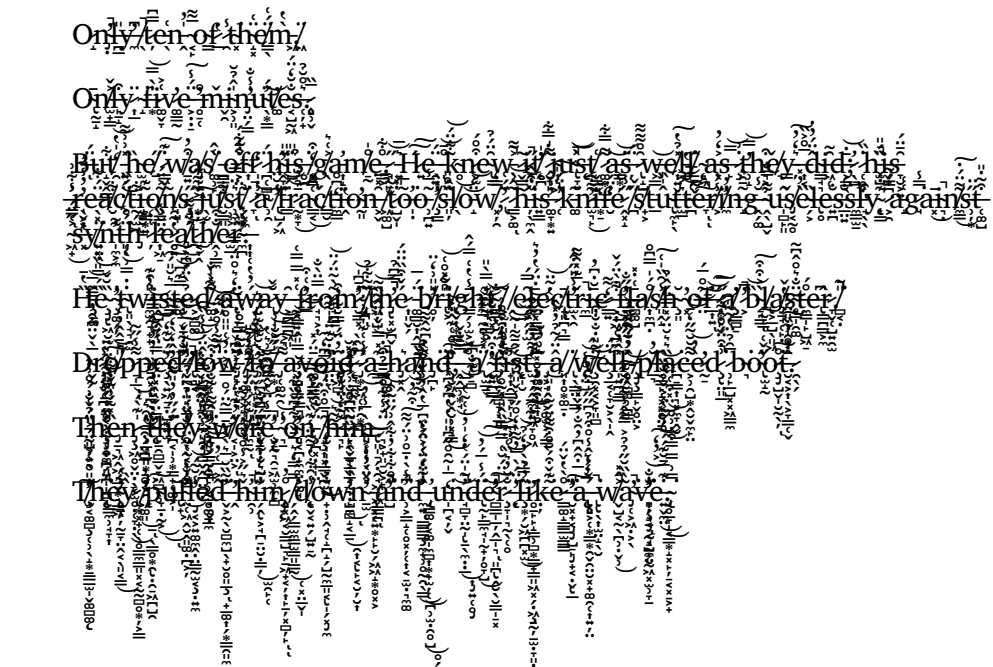
“Glass?” Breath brushed against the shell of his ear. A voice full of gravel, pitched low.

Rex threw his elbow back hard and twisted out of the stranger's grip. He reached into his pockets for his knives, his blaster -

And came up empty.

Stupid. He hissed out a breath between clenched teeth, turned toward his attacker. His heart was pounding -

And there were hands reaching for him, too many to dodge, too tenacious to lose. Just the ten of them and him in the corridor, ~~five minutes away from his exit route.~~



~~Only ten of them.~~

~~Only five minutes.~~

~~But he was off his game. He knew it just as well as they did; his reactions just a fraction too slow, his knife stuttering uselessly against synth leather.~~

~~He twisted away from the bright, electric flash of a blaster.~~

~~Dropped low to avoid a hand, a fist, a well-placed boot.~~

~~Then they were on him.~~

~~They pulled him down and under like a wave.~~

When he came back to himself, he was somewhere else.

He peered carefully through his eyelashes.

He was lying on the floor of a small, dimly lit room. A faint, electric hum was singing out from somewhere to his left. His head was in someone's lap; their thigh was warm, solid muscle against his cheek. Whoever the person was, they were restless, hands and fingers in constant motion, though he could not see what they were doing without opening his eyes more.

He forced himself to not tense up, but it was too late. The person stilled. They sighed, and there was something familiar at the sound, something -

“Are you okay?” Juno Steel asked.

Rex blinked, and found himself staring up at Juno Steel’s face.

He felt suddenly *criminally* stupid.

“Ju - Detective,” he said, clearing his throat. His face was warm, which was both horribly incriminating and *deeply* embarrassing. Juno stared down at him, too sharp and too soft at the same time.

“Hate to say it,” Juno said, and kept saying it regardless with a wry half-grin. “but we have got to stop meeting like this.”

His eye was still serious. There was a depth to him that Rex had missed, the first time around, back at the Kanagawa mansion. He had been understandably distracted, of course, but there was something about Juno's gaze on him now that was …

It was like a magic trick. Keep people focused on the spectacle to keep them from seeing the subtle details.

If you were watching Juno Steel's mouth, keeping careful track of the things he was saying, you weren't watching his eyes.

And Juno Steel's eyes, it seemed, were always watching *you.*

Rex blinked.

“What … happened to your eye, Detective?” he asked, caught on the thought. At the end of the case with the death mask of Grimpotheuthis –

The muscles of Juno's thigh tensed. The half-smile turned plastic. Rex winced.

“I realize it's none of my business – ”

“It's fine,” said Juno, still with that same, mask-like expression. “Can't blame a guy for wondering, right? I mean, it's been, what, two years since the last time we met?”

“One year,” Rex said.

He was almost certain.

“Sure,” Juno said. He frowned. “And I still had both eyes then, huh? So I get why you'd ask, and it's fine. It doesn't matter. I'm doing fine.

The one-eyed look really completes the private eye image I'm going for, you know? I really think I have something good going here."

"Juno – "

"Right," Juno said. "There was something growing behind my eye, and the growth was removed. The eye was collateral damage."

"I … see," Rex said. "I'm sorry, Juno."

"Yeah?" Juno leaned away with a little half-laugh, tipping his head up to stare at the ceiling. "I'm not so sure about that, Rex."

The line of his jaw was dusted in dark stubble. Rex watched the muscles there work, tensing and relaxing and tensing again.

He felt off-balance. Out of words, or unable to find them in the first place.

Juno seemed to have said what he wanted to say as well. The silence spilled out between them like oil from a leaky barrel, slippery and hard to navigate, leaving only the low hum of machinery from somewhere to their left. On a second glance, it was clear that they were in the back room of The Emerald Bough; there were shelves hugging the walls that he could see, stocked with coffee and half-fabricated antimatter cronuts.

"How did you convince them to let you use their back room?" he asked, cutting through the silence.

"Oh, I know a guy," Juno said vaguely.

"Somehow, Juno, I get the feeling you know a lot of … guys."

Juno laughed. "Don't forget the dames."

"I would never," Rex said, "under any circumstance, forget the dames."

Juno looked down at him again, and there was that softness again, that unearned and unexpected warmth written all over his face, in the quirk of his mouth, the stars in his eye.

"Good," he said, voice dipping into a darker register. "Some dames don't like to be forgotten."

Rex was no stranger to seduction, nor to possessiveness. Juno's voice

stole the breath out of him anyway, leaving behind a strange and aching vacuum.

He laughed to cover up the loss of footing, light and airy and deeply amused.

“Why, Detective,” he said, “in that case, I will do my best not to.”

“You'd better,” Juno said, with an earnestness that could strip flesh from bone. His hands hovered awkwardly above Rex’ face, a breath away from touching.

It should have been too much.

Anyone who put that much emotion on the table that quickly was a liability at best.

At worst, they were a threat.

Rex had no doubt about which side of the scale Juno was likely to end up on. Tepid first meeting aside, he had a sense that the lady was not one for doing things by halves.

And yet –

And yet.

There was something about him – his voice or his hands or the way he held himself, down to the final vibrating atom – that made Rex want to join in.

It was unexpected. Like Juno's presence was a burst of brightness in a pitch-black room. Like opening a window at a crack and realizing that the air around you had been dead and stale, like suddenly being able to breathe a little easier.

Like the grey shell of Rex' life was cracking; like his hands were coming away bright with color.

“I mean, ah,” Juno was saying, wild-eyed. “Not that I mean, uh –”

“Let's go out,” Rex said, cutting through Juno's stuttered explanation. Juno went still.

“What?”

Rex pushed himself off Juno's lap and stood up. He reached a hand

down for Juno to take, feeling … bright. Daring. A piece of himself he thought he had lost was turning like a spring winding up. “I am sure Dark Matters can spare me for the rest of the day, and I hear private detectives have flexible schedules. What do you say, Juno?”

-

They went out, and then, much later, they went home to Rex' apartment.

“Nice place,” Juno said, in a tone that suggested something entirely different.

“Thank you, Juno,” Rex said mildly.

Juno leaned against the black marble countertop. Seeing him there, having him scowling in his kitchen, made it feel … smaller, somehow. Like Juno’s presence forced him to see the space in a different way than he did when he was alone.

“Doesn't feel like you,” Juno said, practically pouting. It was annoyingly endearing.

Rex grinned at him. “I apologize, Detective, are my tastes in interior design not *personal* enough for you?”

“God forbid there's any piece of you on display in the place where you live,” Juno muttered, scowling, as though the situation filled him with moral indignation.

The look on his face was a punch in the gut.

Oh, Rex thought. It was not the first time today that he had looked at Juno Steel and thought it, that kind of helpless, breathless exhalation that only stayed inside his head through sheer luck and a long life of training in keeping a straight face.

“I work for Dark Matters, Juno,” Rex said, as neutral as he could manage. Juno's eye was still on him, steady, as piercing as any needle. Giving Rex his full attention, brow furrowing with some emotion that Rex couldn't name.

It felt … strange, to have that gaze on him. Strange, and strangely familiar.

“And?” Juno pressed.

Right.

Rex smirked at him. “It is only common sense to keep our weaknesses out of the light.”

“Right, so if I turn the lights out – ?”

“Perhaps we should turn them off and find out?” Rex asked, grinning with all his teeth.

Juno blinked, and then there was a heat in his eye that hadn't been there before. “Somehow I get the feeling we aren't talking about interior decorating anymore, Glass.”

“Why, Detective,” Rex said, “how would you get that impression?”

Juno took his hand and held it. He had the callouses of a frequent blaster user. His hand was very warm; broad fingers pressed against the back of Rex's, rough fingertips tracing gentle circles against his skin.

It was getting difficult to breathe.

Juno’s face went serious again, all traces of annoyance and humor washed away. He leaned closer, invading Rex’ personal space.

Rex found himself not minding, found himself helplessly zeroing in on Juno’s fingers and eye and mouth –

Everything became hushed and close and open, all at once.

“Rex,” Juno said, low, voice cracking on the vowel. “I want –”

Rex wanted, too. He said so. “Yes.”

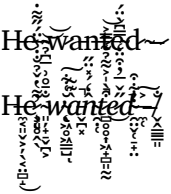
Juno's free hand brushed his cheek, gentle, as though Rex was an animal he was trying not to spook. He traced the line of Rex' cheekbone.

Rex closed his eyes and leaned into the touch.

The ghost of a memory moved across his skin, almost close enough to make sense of.

Juno made a sound in the back of his throat, desperate, like he couldn't help it. Like it had been pulled from him hook and wire.

Rex wanted –



“*Rex*.”

Rex blinked. He was on the floor, back against the refrigerator. Juno was crouching down next to him, looking at him with a worried, vibrating intensity. His hands were on Rex’ shoulders.

He was clearly waiting for Rex to say something, but it was difficult to find words. His head felt as though it was full of bees. The hum of the refrigerator made it worse, echoing through the bone of his skull. Thoughts attempted to form and disintegrated like wet paper, over and over.

“Yes?” he finally managed, with some effort.

“You're bleeding,” Juno said. He took a hand off Rex’ shoulder, gesturing vaguely at his own nose to illustrate.

“Oh,” Rex said. Dumbly, he touched his own upper lip. His fingers came away wet.

They stared at them for a moment.

“Well,” Rex said, “that does rather kill the mood.”

Juno gave a little laugh, or, at the very least, something laugh-adjacent. “I'll, uh, get you some paper.”

He got up and walked over to the kitchen sink. Rex stared at the air in front of him as Juno turned on the tap. There was something

There had been —

It was difficult to think about. Whatever it was, it seemed to be constantly slipping out of focus, lingering just at the edge of his memory, like a shadow in the corner of his eye. His head throbbed warningly, as though it might split open if he kept trying to make sense of … whatever was happening.

Not knowing was sickening, but he couldn't –

“Here,” said Juno. He reached down to hand Rex a damp paper towel, but pulled it back at the last minute. An expression flashed on his face. It was too quick to read exactly, but Rex recognized the look of someone doing a quick mental calculation.

“Denying a man in need, Detective?”

Juno rolled his eye at him. “Shut up, Glass.”

Then he sat down on his knees on the floor, straddling him.

“How forward,” Rex murmured. Everything was swimming slightly, blurring together at the edges.

“Yeah, yeah,” Juno grouched. He leaned forward, close enough that their foreheads were almost touching, and lifted the towel. “I’m gonna clean you up a bit, okay? Let me know if it offends your delicate sensibilities.”

In any other circumstance, Rex might have protested – he was not a *child,* after all – but he was *tired*. He was tired, and Juno was here. Juno was *safe*, somehow; was worth trusting with his health, this once.

Also, the hum of the fridge was making his eyes hurt.

“If you must,” he said primly. Juno *hmm*ed. Very carefully, he began to dab at the blood on Rex' upper lip. The paper was cool against Rex' skin, but the heat of Juno's hands, of his *body*, seemed to radiate from him like sunlight, to pull him in like the gravity of some distant star.

Rex closed his eyes. He let himself be pulled.

“You're falling asleep,” Juno murmured, half worried and half amused.

“On the contrary, Detective,” Rex said, without opening his eyes. “You will find that Dark Matters agents never sleep.”

“Guess we have something in common, then,” Juno said drily. He put a hand on the side of Rex' face, tilting it to get a better angle, and then the tissue returned again.

“A perfect match, one might say,” said Rex, dizzy and unforgivably reckless.

Juno gave a startled little laugh. “Pretty forward, aren't you?”

“Not usually,” Rex said. He rested his head against the door of the refrigerator. “I suppose you bring it out in me, Detective.”

“Among other things,” Juno said, half under his breath and badly hidden. Rex opened his eyes to look at him, feigning ignorance.

“What was that?”

“N-nothing. It was nothing,” Juno said. Then he sighed. He lowered his hands, and then he lowered his head, until his forehead was leaning on Rex' shoulder. “You know, I really thought,” and then he mumbled something unintelligible into the fabric of Rex' shirt. Rex glanced down at him. At a slant like this, most of what he could see was hair, and under that, the slope of Juno's skull, the soft, exposed skin at the nape of his neck. There was, Rex thought, a thousand ways he could kill Juno from this angle. A hundred, without even reaching for a knife to do it with.

He couldn't remember the last time he had allowed anyone to get this close.

He couldn't remember the last time anyone had made themselves this vulnerable to him, either.

It was enough to send his heart crawling up his throat.

“You thought what?” he asked, gentle enough to make a stranger of himself.

Juno's breath brushed against Rex' clavicle when he spoke. “You ever think about leaving this place?”

Rex had spent a lot of time ruthlessly stamping out his tells. Bad liars tended to not last long in Dark Matters; if you weren't careful, what ended up ruthlessly stamped out would be *you*, and Rex did not intend to be held up as an example of what happened to less capable agents.

Even then, it was difficult not to stiffen at the question. His stomach twisted; his palms wanted desperately to sweat.

There was no good reason for his reaction, of course.

It was just a question.

A fairly innocuous one, at that.

Still. He gave a thoughtful hum, as though he was considering it.

“What do you mean, Juno?”

“I've been to prison cells with more personality than this, and Dark Matters isn't exactly … well,” Juno said, with a laugh that was not a laugh. “Don't you want to get out?”

“Juno,” Rex said. He smiled. He kept it light. “What else is there?”

Chapter End Notes

Bleed is a term used in tabletop rpgs for moments where you-the-person blends into the character you're playing, and vice versa.

STATIC

Chapter Summary

Rex has a meltdown.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There were hands on him and arms around him, and then there weren't.

Rex opened his eyes. He stared blankly at the ceiling, body sore with the memory of pain. His skull felt as though it was made from gelatin. Everything was just a little too blurry for comfort.

Right. He blinked hard; the world gradually came into focus.

He was still in yesterday's clothes. His shirt had shifted while he slept, bunching up slightly under his armpits. It was still dark outside; the neon lights from the street outside painted everything pink and murky burgundy.

There was a body beside him, moving, pulling back the covers.

Juno.

It was –

Not wrong. Just not … *expected*. He wasn't used to waking up *next to* someone.

After Juno had helped clean him up last night, they had both crawled into bed together. Rex had fallen asleep to the sound of Juno breathing. It had been nice, being that close to someone.

They hadn't done anything, of course. If wanting to – if *wanting* was enough to knock him out, he didn't want to know what anything physical might do to him.

The thought made his stomach churn.

He folded it away.

"Did I wake you up?" Juno asked, looking down at him, voice rough

with sleep.

Rex pushed himself up into a sitting position and squinted at the alarm clock on his bedside table. 4:45.

“Bad dreams,” he said. Talking made his head ache. Phantom pains. “What’s your excuse, Detective?”

Juno’s face fell. He looked away. “I have to go.”

Ah. That stung, just a little. He told himself he was being melodramatic – if Juno had places to be, that was none of Rex’ business, after all. It wasn’t as though they had known each other for long enough to even call each other “friends”, let alone anything else.

Perhaps Juno had only stayed out of a more general concern for his health, and now that Rex had made it through most of the night without dying, he was ready to move on with his life.

Rex picked at the edge of his bedsheet, fighting off a wave of sullen, wounded nausea. “Leaving so soon?” he asked.

Juno didn’t answer. Rex could feel his eye on him, heavy like a physical weight. “Hey,” he said, reaching out to gently put his hand on top of Rex’. “Are you okay?”

Rex frowned at him. “I’m fine.”

“You sure about that?” Juno asked.

Rex went cold. The weight of Juno’s gaze was crushing, suddenly, a reminder of his own inadequacy, his failure to function like a normal person.

“I am not an *invalid*, Juno,” he snapped, despite his own best efforts. “You don’t have to – to *mother hen* me – ”

“What?” Juno asked, bristling.

“I don’t need your pity.”

Juno snorted. “Is that what you think this is?”

“What else is there, Juno?” Rex barely restrained himself from rolling his eyes. “Don’t tell me you have convinced yourself that you *care* about me, we barely know each other.”

“You *know what?*” Juno said, and then his mouth shut with an audible click.

“Clearly not,” Rex said primly. His hands threatened to shake. He resumed picking at the edge of the bedsheet again. It felt as though if he didn’t, he might vomit from the awful, restless ache in him. It might be words or sick, but he was in no hurry to find out which one it might be.

“… Right,” Juno said. He sighed, and then began to speak with a quiet intensity that Rex couldn’t look away from. “N – *Rex*. I know we haven’t … I just think you’re … I want to know you. And I think you want to know me, too. This isn’t about *pity*. Even if we aren’t, what, *married?* I can still care about you.”

“I,” Rex said, and then found himself unable to finish the sentence. It was almost novel. “I suppose,” he said instead. It sounded petulant even in his own ears, and he winced.

“You don’t have to, uh,” Juno said, and then stopped again. His thumb swiped up the inside of Rex’ wrist, though he didn’t seem to notice doing it. “No pressure, I mean. I just, uh. If there is anything I can do –?”

The expression on his face was soft and open and concerned, and it made Rex’ stomach twist. It was pathetic, but he wanted nothing more than to ask Juno to stay.

“… Not at the moment,” he said instead, trying to make it sound true. He took a deep breath. “Though perhaps we could meet again soon? I will do my best not to pass out *quite* so many times next time.”

Juno huffed out a laugh. “How about after work? I have something I want to show you.”

“Well,” Rex said. “I’m a busy man, Juno, but I’m sure I can fit you into my schedule.”

“Thanks,” Juno said drily. He squeezed Rex’ hand. Rex found himself leaning in towards him, pulled in until their shoulders were touching. Juno put his free arm around Rex’ waist, absentmindedly stroking his side.

Time passed.

The alarm clock ticked past 5.15.

“I thought you had to go,” Rex murmured. Juno sighed.

“Yeah,” he said, making a face, untangling himself from Rex and the sheets. “I’ll see you later?”

“You will,” Rex said. Juno looked down at him for a long moment from the edge of the bed. Rex couldn’t read the look on his face.

“I didn't want to go without letting you know I was leaving,” he said, after a long pause, voice cracking like a shell, like plates of armor sticking together in the wrong place and leaving a soft and tender spot exposed. “Not this time.”

Rex frowned at him. “What?”

“I’ll tell you later,” Juno said.

He leaned in and pressed a soft kiss against Rex' cheek. Then he went to put on his shoes.

Rex stared at him, a little stunned. “Well,” he said. He cleared his throat. “You know where to find me, Detective.”

Juno shrugged on his coat and smiled at him, suddenly brighter than Rex had ever seen him. “I do.”

-

Rex was still thinking about it later, sitting in the chair in Doctor Gold's office with his skin covered in electrodes, head still aching. Doctor Gold was asking him the usual questions, and he was giving the usual answers, but no matter how hard he tried, he could not tear his thoughts away from –

From Juno.

“You seem distracted, Agent Glass,” Doctor Gold said, neutral as milk.

“Never, Doctor,” said Rex. Juno's fingers had been so gentle against his skin last night, despite their callouses. They had been warm, the heat of them on his face a steady, quiet reassurance.

“Hm,” Doctor Gold said. She leaned incrementally forward in her chair. “Your supervisor tells me you did not return to work after lunch yesterday. Why was that?”

Juno's mouth had been gentle, too, when he kissed Rex' cheek before

leaving.

“Oh, just a touch of food poisoning, I believe,” Rex said.

Maybe the next time they met, he would be able to kiss him without fainting like a Neo New Classical Mercurian hero.

Maybe nothing was wrong with him. Maybe yesterday had been a fluke.

He smiled, just a touch self-depreciatingly, pushing that feeling all the way up to the surface. “It passed quickly enough. I may have been … a bit paranoid about it, but paranoia is how we stay alive in this business, isn't it?”

What would it be like to ~~kiss Juno?~~

Doctor Gold frowned. It was a barely perceptible frown, but for Doctor Gold, it was practically yelling her displeasure from the rooftops. She leaned forward in her chair. “You are supposed to report to us when you experience signs of illness, Agent Glass.”

“Oh, it was hardly worth inconveniencing you, Doctor,” said Rex. He thought about ~~kissing Juno; about touching and being touched; about fingers in his hair, hands stroking his skin; about Juno, saying his name into the darkness, into his ear, into his mouth.~~

“I believe that is for *us* to decide, Agent.”

“I would, of course, have come to you if I had still been feeling ill this morning,” Rex said. His mouth was dry, as though he had eaten a box full of cosmetic sponges. There were ~~images in his mind that did not belong there, little snatches like the cut-off frames from an Old Earth film reel.~~

~~Juno was in them, cursing and kissing and bleeding and fighting; they were sitting back to back with their hands tied; Rex played rangian street poker as Juno watched, carefully taking in the game; they were on a train and in a temple; Juno was in his brain and they were both screaming; Juno was in a sealed room with a monstrous woman and the Egg of Parus; Juno was saving him and saving him and Juno held him close in a dark hotel room; Juno's footsteps left the room, and Rex was a fool for thinking it might ever have been different.~~

~~“Agent Glass,” Doctor Gold said. There was a trace of alarm in her voice for the first time since Rex had met her. He tried to answer, but~~

his mouth would not move. The images of his mind shifted, pinballing like a random storm, a kaleidoscope filled with the

And he was in the corridor running. It had been a mistake, a mistake, he knew it from the first. The

Scanned with CamScanner

Chapter End Notes

:)

ESCAPE

Chapter Summary

Waking up alone.

He woke up.

His head was pounding. His eyes were closed.

It took him a moment to remember the rest of his body.

He was lying on the floor, cheek pressed against rough concrete. His mouth tasted like blood and tinfoil.

He did a quick inventory of his limbs and found them all present and accounted for.

Right.

There was an electric hum in the air, a harsh, grating buzz he could feel in his bones.

With a sense of foreboding that was rapidly approaching alarm, he opened his eyes.

Light, pale and sterile, made the headache worse, made his vision warp and spark with dark color.

He did not recognize the room he was in.

Not that there was much to recognize; it was small and featureless, just four plain walls and a concrete floor and an equally concrete ceiling. There was no door, and no windows. There was no furniture, either. The room was completely empty except for a light in the ceiling and a dark screen set into one of the walls.

He could not remember how he had gotten here.

He frowned into the concrete.

He could not remember who he was, either.

That was … concerning.

He closed his eyes and covered his face with his hands to shut out the light. A mockery of respite, perhaps, but the darkness made it easier to think.

Think.

There was a hole where a hole shouldn't be.

There were *many* holes where holes shouldn't be, in fact, and the holes were all in his brain. He could remember –

Well, some things. The chemical composition of sodium hypochlorite. The exact angle and pressure needed to stab through a person's windpipe. The general concept of mathematics.

Normal background stuff.

Concrete memories, however…

He kept drawing blanks. Kept stumbling into holes.

There *must* be something, surely, some memory left somewhere, if only he could *concentrate* –

Even as he thought it, he had a sinking, sideways feeling that there wouldn't be.

That there was simply nothing there.

Whoever he had been, whatever he had experienced … for now, at least, he could only assume that it was gone.

He opened his eyes.

The room was still the same.

Carefully, he rose from the floor. His mouth was dry.

Well.

Might as well make oneself useful.

Inspecting the room for any potential cracks or weak points was a depressingly quick affair. There was an almost imperceptible, door-shaped indent in one of the walls, but he was unable to find any kind of gap or mechanism that might help him open it.

The only real point of weakness was the screen set into the wall. The sides of it were so flush with the wall that there was hardly a gap at all, just a smooth line of concrete-turned-glass-turned-concrete-again.

Still, it was a weak point.

If only he had something to break it with, he could –

The screen flickered to life. A bright line of letters appeared on the screen, green against black. He startled, taking an involuntary step back.

HELLO, MISTAH GLASS

"What –?" he managed. Another line of letters appeared.

WE'RE GONNA GET YOU OUT OF THERE, DON'T YOU WORRY

He frowned at the screen. Glass?

“What is this?” he murmured. In response, more letters appeared with alarming speed.

OH, IT'S NOTHING, I JUST HAD A FRIEND INSTALL ANOTHER LITTLE “FRIEND”, IF YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN, AND THEN I JUST DID A COUPLE A'LITTLE TWEAKS TO THE SYSTEM AND IT GOT ME IN JUST LIKE *THAT!* AND THEN -

YES, BOSS

SORRY, BOSS

“Who are you?” he asked, frowning.

I'M RITA!

OH, DON'T YOU WORRY, BOSS, IT'S NOT LIKE I'LL LEAVE THE LOG BEHIND WHEN WE'RE DONE

ANYWAY, MISTAH GLASS, I'M GONNA NEED YOU TO DO EXACTLY WHAT I TELL YOU, OR YOU *WILL* PROBABLY DIE

BUT IT'LL BE EASY! PROMISE. BESIDES, IF WHAT MISTAH STEEL TELLS ME IS RIGHT, YOU –

***ANYWAY*, MISTAH GLASS, I'M OPENING THE DOOR IN TEN MINUTES. THEN YOU GOTTA GET OUT, FAST AS YOU CAN, AND FOLLOW THE HALLWAY TO THE LEFT, THEN RIGHT, THEN RIGHT AGAIN, AND THEN KEEP GOING UNTIL YOU REACH THE NEXT INTERSECTION. THEN YOU JUST GOTTA WAIT THERE, AND DON'T YOU PEEK OUT INTO THE NEXT HALLWAY, ‘CAUSE THERE'S THREE AGENTS STATIONED THERE AND THEY'RE GONNA SEE YOU.**

Suspicion made him wary. “And then what?”

AND THEN MISTAH STEEL WILL COME GET YOU AND –

There was a brief pause, and then a final line of words.

TEN MINUTES, GLASS. WE'RE GETTING YOU OUT OF THERE.

The screen gave a bright flash, and then it went blank again.

He exhaled slowly, full of barely-leashed tension. It hummed expectantly under his skin and made his teeth tingle, as though he had stepped on a live wire, as though the background buzz of electricity had become part of him somehow.

This might be a trap.

It was still a better deal than staying.

And besides –

Well.

He didn't know these people, but he had the feeling that meeting them would be *very* interesting.

-

Some time later, the door-shaped part of the wall shimmered and went liquid, falling away to reveal a metal door with no apparent keyhole or handle. As he watched, an internal mechanism in the door clicked into place, and it swung open, revealing a plain, nondescript hallway.

Right.

Outside, the air was still. The underlying electric buzzing of his cell cut out so sharply that it left him unsettled, as though he had missed the final step at the bottom of some sonic staircase. The walls of the corridor were white; the floor was covered with dark, mirror-shine tiles, smooth as soap under his bare feet. It was made to make trespassers audible long before they were *visible*, and when he walked, his footsteps echoed harshly down the corridor.

He stopped.

Shook himself a little.

Readjusted.

When he moved again, he was soundless.

-

Left and right and right again, down corridors that seemed unending until they weren't, and then he was standing flush against a corner, staying quiet, staying still. His blood pounded in his ears, an insistent,

tripping beat.

He felt ... not fear. That was interesting, he thought, faintly amused despite everything. To be the kind of person who escaped a holding cell on the word of people he could not remember ever meeting, and not feel afraid, even as he was barefoot and defenseless.

Well – his mouth curled into a grin – unarmed. Not defenseless.

It wasn't fear that caused his heart to beat faster.

It was *excitement,* singing through him like a half-remembered tune, whistling through his bones like they were hollow.

He took a deep breath. The hallway had been cleaned not too long ago; the citrus smell of disinfectant hung in the air.

There were quiet voices coming from one end of the hallway, where he couldn't see. A sharply voiced admonishment; a flatly voiced comment; a deep, pleased chuckle.

And then –

There were footsteps coming down the hallway. A single set with an even, heavy tread. Whoever was walking did not seem to care about being heard.

He leaned closer to the wall. It was cool against his back, against his fingers.

Avoiding detection in a space this open would be a challenge if the agent got close enough. There were no rooms to hide in; he had not come across a single door since leaving his own cell.

That didn't mean that they weren't *there*, of course, but ...

Well.

If he was being entirely honest with himself, he did not mind the idea of a confrontation as much as he probably should.

Carefully, he went down into a crouch, muscles tensing, waiting, ready.

The footsteps moved closer and closer still; in the distance, the sharp voice and the deep voice were still talking quietly.

He took a breath to center himself. Just a little closer –

The woman did not see him until it was too late. The second she stepped into his field of vision, he grabbed hold of her arm, yanking her into the side hallway. She gave a surprised yelp and tried to step back, to mount a defense.

She was too slow.

He had her knocked out on the floor before she could react. Taking her down was as natural as breathing.

There was no time to catch his breath. Down the hall, the two other agents were shouting, running, calling for back-up.

He quickly patted down the downed agent for weapons. There was a small blaster hanging in a clip-on holster on her belt. He pulled it out and armed it, flipping the switch to stun.

The other agents were getting closer; he heard their footsteps hurrying up the hallway.

He leaned around the corner and fired off a shot, barely aiming. It went wide, glancing one of the lights in the ceiling. The glass bulbs shattered, going dark with a shower of glass.

The agents shot back, firing a concentrated volley that missed him by a hair. He shot towards them again, once and twice and –

Click.

Click.

Click.

Out of juice.

And then –

Then they were on him, blasters raised. Their mouths were bared into grins, or something that looked like grins if one didn't pay too much attention.

“Got a *runner,* hmm?” said one in a sharp voice. “However shall we deal with you?”

“Guess some people never learn,” said the other in a deep voice.

“Now, friends,” he said, with a pleasant smile. Without his permission, his fingers tightened on the blaster handle. “I take it we can't handle this in some other way?”

The deep-voiced agent laughed. “Sounds about right, kid. Now –”

Next to them, the sharp-voiced agent folded like a house of cards.

A stocky man with one eye and a janitor's jumpsuit was standing behind him, brandishing a mop like a weapon. He looked like vengeance personified. He was beautiful.

“Cleaning service,” he said.

The final agent rounded on the stranger, blaster primed to fire.

Time to act.

He launched himself at them while they were distracted by the other man, downing them with a precise kick to the back of the knee and an elbow to the side of the head.

Their blaster fired.

Heat seared past him. It singed the side of his chest before it hit the wall behind him, searing its way into the insulation.

Then everything was quiet.

He got to his feet and brushed the hair out of his eyes. The smell of burnt plastic hung in the air. The hole in the wall was smoking faintly.

The stranger was looking at him, face unreadable. The man’s eye was knifepoint sharp, and his cheekbones should probably be illegal. Considering the fact that the man was currently helping him break out of a highly secured facility, they very well might be, along with all the rest of him.

“Mister Steel, I presume?”

“Juno,” said the stranger, voice cracking a little at the edges. He cleared his throat. “Please, call me Juno.”

“Juno,” he repeated. It was a good name. He liked how he felt, saying it. “I take it you're here to get me out of here?”

REFUGE

Chapter Summary

Exit and enter.

They escaped into the sewers through a supply closet three sub-basements down from his cell. Juno led him out through a ragged hole in the wall and onto a long, narrow platform fifteen feet above the sewer canal below. He leaned against the platform railing, trying not to mind the smell, while Juno clicked a small, square piece of tech off the outside wall with a few taps of his comms. The moment it detached, a tight mesh of white and blue light spread out across the wall and the hole they'd come out through with a sound like rushing water. The light brightened until it reached an almost painful intensity, and then it was as though it had never been there in the first place. Some kind of perimeter alarm reactivated, it would seem.

"Wouldn't want to get sloppy," Juno said drily, and shoved the thing into his pocket.

"Oh, I don't know, Juno. I find that getting sloppy has its charms," his mouth said, voice dripping with innuendo without any input from his brain.

"What."

Not, on the whole, a bad question. He frowned thoughtfully into the middle distance. "Well. I assume. I don't know why I said that."

Juno shot him a long look, then sighed, nudging him in the side with an elbow. "Alright, Captain Amnesia, let's get out of here before Dark Matters finds us and erases *both* our memories."

Dark Matters, like he should know what that was. Like it wasn't clear enough already that he didn't know *anything*, or at least nothing that wasn't rudimentary knowledge. He could feel his way to the right pressure and angle needed to pick a lock, sure, but he was hardly up to date on his civics.

It was frustrating, not knowing. It made him feel naked in a way that left him both embarrassed and wide open for a knife in the back.

He watched Juno take the three steps to the service ladder at the edge

of the platform. It was tempting to not say anything, to leave the extent of this … this *damage* out of the conversation for now, if only to spare his ego.

Still.

Still.

He couldn't stand not knowing.

"What's Dark Matters?"

Juno barked out a laugh, or something that sounded like it. He was already a few rungs down the ladder, shoulders parallel with the edge of the platform. "They really did a number on you this time, huh?"

"*This* time?" The words came out more high-pitched than he meant them to. He couldn't help it; the thought that this might have happened *before*, that this might not be the first time he forgot himself, was –

Well. It was unpleasant.

"Long story," Juno said, and resumed his descent.

"How many times has this happened to me?" he asked, as Juno disappeared out of his line of sight. "*Juno?*"

Juno didn't say anything until they were both standing on the raised concrete walkway that ran on the side of the sewer canal. "I don't know," he said, as though that was a sufficient answer, and set off down the canal at a brisk pace.

"What?" he asked, half-jogging until he could catch up.

Thankfully, Juno was short, and catching up meant three half-jogged steps.

"I said I don't know," Juno said, still walking, shoulders hunched up to his ears.

"Hmm." Dirty water pooled stagnant in holes in the concrete of the walkway. He stepped around them as best he could, but even the drier parts of the concrete were damp and gritty under his bare feet. "But you know it has happened at least once before?"

"Kind of," Juno said, leading them down a smaller, intersecting

tunnel, jamming his hands deeper into the pockets of his uniform. “Like I said. It’s a long story.”

“It’s *my* story,” he said, annoyed. Juno stopped, turning to look at him. Juno’s eye was dark in the half-light of the sewers. Looking into it felt like falling.

“I’ll tell you everything,” Juno said. “Just … just let us get somewhere safe first.”

“I’m sure we’ve both mastered walking and talking at the same time, Juno.”

Juno gave a long-suffering sigh, but he got with the program nonetheless. “Fine,” he said. His hands came out of his pockets; he moved them emphatically as he spoke. “*Fine*. You want to know what’s going on? You used to steal stuff for a living, and then we worked together and you almost *died*, and *I* almost died, and then half a year later I find you at some, some *stupidly* overpriced coffee shop and you think you’re your *alias* – ”

Juno’s mouth shut with a snap, and he looked away, scowling.

Well.

There was a lot to unpack there.

“I … see,” he said uncertainly, stepping around a particularly large puddle. “We were partners in crime, then?”

Juno made a face that was somehow even more affronted. It was … endearing, the way his jaw tightened. “I’m a *detective*.”

“Oh, my mistake, Detective.” He grinned at him. “Forgive me for thinking that the person who broke into a highly secure facility to break out a thief might also possibly be some kind of criminal.”

“Look,” Juno said, “I don’t exactly make a habit of this, N – Re – *hmm*.” He stopped. “Do you even remember what your name is?”

“Not at all,” he said airily, sidestepping a particularly large puddle. “Though your … Rita did call me Glass.”

“It's an alias,” Juno said. He paused as though waiting for a reaction, and then went on. “You're taking all of this pretty well.”

“Well,” he said. “I may be missing my memories and covered in

sewage, but I am no longer stuck in a cell, which I think you'll agree is an improvement."

And it felt … good, he realized, to have Juno walking through the sewers next to him.

Companionable, perhaps.

Safe.

The thought arrived without warning, and then it sat there in his mind, as heavy and solid as any anchor, slotting into place as though it had always had a place there.

Very carefully, he put it aside for later.

"So what *is* my name?" he asked. "... I suppose it wouldn't hurt to have a list of aliases either."

"You have a lot of aliases," Juno said. He seemed to be smiling despite himself. "Rex Glass, Duke Rose … you never gave me the full list, but knowing you, it could fill the Hyperion City Library."

"And my real name?"

"Nureyev," said Juno, soft and somehow reverent. "Peter Nureyev."

Hearing Juno say it made him shudder. The weight he gave it –

"Thank you," he said.

Peter Nureyev, he thought to himself.

The name did not feel any more or less familiar than the other names Juno had given him.

Still, there was something different about it. Something not like familiarity and not like a feeling. An empty space where feeling should be.

He set that aside for future reference, too.

-

Peter didn't know what time it had been when he had left his cell, but when they climbed out of the sewers and into a narrow alley, it was night. Juno led him through a series of poorly lit back streets and up a

rickety ladder, stopping at last on the fire escape outside of a third-floor window. The fire escape shuddered slightly under their combined weight.

Juno knocked out a quick series of short raps on the window.

The curtains sprang open to reveal a short, bespectacled woman in a bright blue sweater. She opened the window and then stepped back, gesturing wildly at them to come in. Once they were inside and the window was closed, she launched herself at Juno, enveloping him in a tight hug.

"*Boss!*" she exclaimed into his general chest area. "You made it!"

"Yeah," said Juno, sounding only a little bit winded. "Had to take out some guards, but after that it was smooth sailing."

The woman let go and took a step back. "I was getting real worried there for a minute, Mistah Steel," she said, pouting just a little. "It's not *every* day we break someone out of Dark Matters, you know! People don't even manage to break in there in the streams!"

"That's because Dark Matters sends a guy to the production company to make sure," Juno pointed out.

"Well, sure, but that don't mean it's not realistic. Like there was this one stream, *Ocean's 500*? That one's based on a true story about this crew of five hundred who try to break in by disguising themselves as furniture – and they got all the way to the front door before Dark Matters caught on!" The woman – Rita, Peter assumed – pushed on. Her hands moved hummingbird quick as she talked, and her words came quicker. The light of the ceiling lamps hit the plastic glitter frame of her glasses, refracting back in rainbows. "It got real bloody at the end there, though – and it's not that I didn't think you couldn't handle yourself, Mistah Steel! I had my eye on you the entire time and everything! But then once you left the building I started thinking about that special of *Sewer Masquerade* –"

The room they were in had three doors, in addition to the window they'd just come in through. Two were to his left, most likely leading to a bathroom and a bedroom; the final door, set into a small alcove and framed by coats and shoes, was to his right, and clearly lead to the hallway outside. It was bolted shut.

The room itself was small, kitchen and couch and holovid screen squashed together. Despite the lack of space, the overall effect was

cozy rather than stifling. It was comfortable and lived in, punctuated by colorful blankets and the odd snack wrapper. On the holovid screen, a woman was tearfully declaring her love to an officer and a gentleman, though it was difficult to tell if they were the same person.

"- and I told Fran, I said, this is *just* like in *The Crystalline Tear Heist*," the woman who was probably Rita said, and the mood of the conversation had shifted a little while he wasn't paying attention, because now she was smiling, "with all the romance and under the table borrowing of proprietary tech? I was *real* impressed you were able to swing it, boss."

"Yeah," Juno said uncomfortably. He scratched at the back of his neck. "Rita, this is – Rex Glass. Rex, this is Rita, my secretary. She helped with the," he made a vague gesture that might mean anything from lending him a pen to high stakes industrial fraud, "technical side of things."

"Lovely to meet you," Peter said, stopping himself from shooting Juno a quizzical look. He reached out his hand, and Rita took it immediately. Her grip was solid. Her fingers were gritty with the ghosts of chips past. "And thank you for your help."

"Mistah Glass," she said brightly, "glad to see you got out okay! I'd swoon but you're kinda sewagey."

"My apologies," he said, and then Rita pushed him into the bathroom and told him not to come out until he had taken a shower.

-

The bathroom was small, like the rest of Rita's apartment, and tiled in white and purple. The shower took up most of it, and a few of the wall tiles were crooked. A silver bowl filled with hair ties and barrettes sat precariously on the edge of the bathroom sink; a plant with broad, green leaves was jammed between it and the bathroom mirror. Carefully, Peter rubbed one of the leaves between his fingers. The rough, organic texture was soothing, and he allowed himself a few seconds to just stand there, touching something that was alive.

All right, he told himself, once the time he had given himself was up. *Time to move on.*

Slowly and meticulously, he undressed, and then he got into the shower.

The water pressure was dreadful, but the water was warm.

He closed his eyes against the stream.

He didn't think for a while.

-

Rita had given him a towel and small pile of clothes to wear. The towel was pleasantly rough against his skin. The clothes were Juno's.

That gave him pause. He found himself touching the soft fabric of the shorts like he'd touched the leaf of Rita's plant, intently and half out of focus.

"Time to move on," he told himself, so quietly he was barely saying it at all. Then he put on the shorts and the t-shirt and went back out into the living room.

-

Juno and Rita were talking in low voices by the kitchen counter.

"Talking about me?" Peter asked, clearing the bar for airy nonchalance with ease. He didn't know the person he used to be, but some things still felt like old habit, like acts and motions that had been done over and over until they were carved deep into his bones of him.

"What else is there to talk about," Juno said, leaning his elbows on the countertop. He made a face at Peter that sat somewhere between sarcastic and sympathetic.

"I suppose I am worthy of the attention," Peter said, smirking.

Juno rolled his eye. "Yeah, yeah," he said, and gestured at the couch. "Why don't you sit down?"

"As you wish," Peter said. He sat down. The couch immediately threatened to swallow him whole.

Juno gave him a long, assessing look. "All right," he said finally.

He glanced at Rita, who looked as though she was physically stopping herself from speaking, and then at what looked like a crumpled scrap of fabric on the kitchen counter. He swallowed. His jaw muscles tightened. He didn't say anything.

“Well?” Peter asked.

“We can fix your memory problem, Mistah Glass!” Rita cut in before Juno could open his mouth. He shot her a sharp look before turning his eye on Peter.

“It might hurt,” he said, with a quiet intensity that pulled like gravity. “Hell, for all we know it might not even work, or leave you worse off. But it you want your memories back … this is your best shot.”

“And what *is* “this”, exactly, Detective?” Peter asked. Juno nodded at the strip of fabric.

“A friend of mine let me borrow it,” he said. “This is the THEIA Mind. It's … pretty experimental, but it should be able to patch you up.”

“Friends in high places, hmm?”

Juno snorted. “Not that good of a friend.”

“I see,” Peter said. He leaned forward. The couch gave a squeaky protest at the movement. “So how will this go down, exactly?”

Rita slammed her hands down on the counter, vibrating slightly with barely repressed excitement. “Okay, Mistah Glass, *first* we’ll need to calibrate the Mind with your base metrics! It’ll take a couple a’ minutes, maybe, you can have a juice or some salmon snacks while you wait if you like – but not the wasabi ones, I’m saving that bag for later, they’re real hard to find and they’re *perfect* for this show I’m making Frannie watch with me – *oh!* The Mind’ll take most of the night to for the actual, you know,” she wriggled her fingers, “*calibration* part, but you don’t have to be around for that, and then tomorrow we’ll strap you in and I’ll run the code! It’s a real easy to use interface, actually? It was kinda shockingly straightforward, honestly.”

Peter opened his mouth to reply, but Rita was still going:

“*Oh!* And if you wanted to learn anything new, like maybe you wanted to pick up a language or two or a history course or – ”

She launched into an impassionate account on the potential of neural uplink learning. The level of detail was impressive and frankly a little terrifying, as were the accompanying hand gestures.

“Let's just focus on the memory loss for now, Rita,” Juno cut in. “And

this whole thing – it's your choice, Glass. We won't force you."

"Well, in *that* case," Peter said, rolling his eyes. As though staying like this wasn't equivalent to walking around blindfolded with a target painted on his back.

As though there was any real choice at all.

-

After Juno had taken a shower and Peter helped Rita pull out the couch, Rita disappeared into her bedroom to sleep. Juno spent some time arranging and rearranging a pile of blankets and a trench coat into a semblance of a sleeping space on the floor, but there was no space; he had to twist himself around like a contortionist, and even then, with his neck at a ninety degree angle, he could barely fit.

Peter watched him from where he was curled up on the mattress, mildly amused.

"You know," he said conversationally, as Juno untwisted himself to adjust the blankets for the fourth time, "the couch has enough space for the two of us."

"Oh, very fuh – " Juno stopped. He looked at his hands on the blanket, then at Peter, and then back again. "You know what? Sure! Yeah. Fine."

He pushed the blankets off, and then turned around and crawled up onto the mattress like a slightly put-upon spider.

Then they were lying there, side by side in the half-dark, listening to each other breathe and say nothing; listening to the constant ocean rush of traffic from the street; listening to the muted sounds of people moving in the hallway. Neon light from a nearby street sign spilled in through a gap in the kitchen curtains. It painted a part of the ceiling bright green, pointed like the blade of a knife. Peter slowed his breathing and closed his eyes and pretended for a moment that he was really trying to sleep.

What would it be like, he thought, *to be Peter Nureyev?*

Would he be a different person? Would he still feel – would he still be waiting for the other shoe to drop, for the trap to close around his leg?

Would that person – the person he had been, who had stolen things,

who had landed himself in this situation in the first place, who seemed to have very powerful enemies – would *that person* be worth being, even as he was too afraid to risk being anyone else?

Afraid. The word sat sour in his gut, but there was no way around it. Not here, in the quiet, gentle dark.

“You're thinking pretty loud there,” Juno murmured. Peter could just make out his profile; the curve of his mouth, the turn of his nose.

He had known this man.

He had known this man well enough to give him his real name, whatever that meant.

He thought it must have meant something important.

Juno turned to face him fully, eye gleaming dark and white and neon green under the shadow of his eyelashes. Peter’s chest constricted.

He needed –

He didn’t know what he needed.

That was the point, he supposed.

“Juno,” he said, a little desperate. “Tell me about myself.”

Juno swallowed.

“When we met,” he said, “you saved my life, and then I had you arrested.”

“*Really*?” Peter asked, too intrigued to keep from interrupting. “How *awfully* rude of you, Detective.”

“Yeah,” Juno said. He smirked. “You stole from my office and then broke out of a police vehicle, though, so I'd say it all evens out.”

The neon lights reflected in the ceiling shifted like ghosts. “Earlier. You said I was a thief.”

Juno shifted closer, though he didn’t seem to notice doing so. “Does that bother you?”

There was some emotion there, buried under the surface, and Peter could almost make out the shape of it –

But not quite. He suspected it would take more than one night and a dramatic rescue to unpick the emotions in Juno Steel's voice.

His eye was sharp, though. As though he could see right through him.

Peter considered the question. “I don't know,” he said. “Did I hurt people?”

Juno swallowed. His jaw tightened. In the hallway outside of Rita’s apartment, someone was giving their best, drunken rendition of a song Peter didn't know.

“... only as much as you thought you had to,” Juno said, and that was – he looked *sad*.

Sad for me*,* Peter thought, but he could not make that equation work.

“Sounds like a fine excuse for bad behavior,” he murmured.

Juno frowned at him. “You were a good person.”

He said it so fiercely, as though it was an immutable fact of the universe.

Peter was less sure.

He remembered how it felt, fighting guards in that Dark Matters hallway.

How his body was singing with it.

“You can't possibly know that,” he said, smirking, as though it was something that could be taken lightly.

“I do,” Juno said. His tone left no room for argument, and yet Peter found he could not stop himself from arguing nonetheless.

“Really, Juno,” he said. “You can’t expect me to believe –”

Juno glared at him. “Alright, smart guy, you want to know how I know?”

“Do enlighten me,” Peter said, in a tone of voice that was all wrong, so soft it was almost naked, a vulnerable, shivering thing in the space between them.

“The last time we met,” Juno said, and then cleared his throat. “The

last time, you let me into your memories. There was a Martian artifact growing into my eye that gave me mind reading powers, it was a whole," he gestured vaguely, "thing."

"Sounds like we live interesting lives."

Juno gave a dry bark of laughter. It shot sparks through Peter's gut.

"You don't know the half of it," Juno said. "But yeah. I've been in your brain. I know you, Nureyev."

He said it like a different dame might have said a term of endearment; "Nureyev", from Juno Steel, sounded less like a last name and more like "darling". It was –

Well. It certainly was *something*.

"You're resourceful," Juno said. "When we met, you could give anyone the runaround. You get lost in tangents even when you're trying to pull off a heist. Your pockets are always full of useless crap; I think you steal things without realizing you're doing it." He leaned a little closer. "Why don't you check your pockets?"

Peter stared at him. When he checked his pockets, his fingers grazed something cold and metal.

He pulled it out.

It was a silver barrette. There was a small butterfly pasted onto one end of it; its wings were made from colored glass.

"... I see," he said, a little stiffly. There was a strange look on Juno's face.

Tentatively, Peter classified it as "fond".

Carefully, he ran a finger over the metal rim of the butterfly's body. "What else?"

"You risked your life for me," Juno said. He gave a small laugh that wasn't quite a laugh. "You risked your life for me, and you saved my life, and you *trusted* me, even though it cost you. And I, I – "

Something slotted into place.

"I loved you," Peter said, from somewhere outside of himself. Juno gave another small laugh, but this time it came out wet.

“Let's talk about this tomorrow,” he said, scrubbing at his face. “It's, it's getting late. You need your sleep.”

His hands were shaking.

Peter forced himself not to stare.

“I will make sure to bring it up, then,” he said instead, as though this was a normal, neutral conversation; as though he could not hear the way Juno's breaths were just a touch too even.

Juno said nothing for a long time. When he finally spoke, Peter was almost asleep.

“Whatever happens tomorrow,” Juno said, so quiet it was almost a whisper, “we’ll be there for you if you need it.”

RETURN

Chapter Summary

Waking up.

Peter woke up with his face pressed into the crook of Juno's neck. Juno's skin smelled like sweat and the coconut scent of Rita's shower gel. His breathing was smooth and even in sleep.

They were tangled up in each other like a knot. Peter's knees were locked around Juno's leg; Juno's hands were pressed up flat in the space between Peter's shoulder blades. It made him feel … dizzy. Bright and fragile like spun sugar.

Juno shifted closer. One of his hands slid farther up Peter's back, until it reached the edge of his borrowed t-shirt, brushing against skin.

Peter's gut gave a shuddering jerk in response. He bit the inside of his lip, hard enough to hurt.

Then he carefully untangled himself. He stumbled to the bathroom. He stared helplessly at his own face in the mirror.

There was a smile on his face.

That was helpless, too.

-

Then everything went very quickly, all at once.

After a quick shower and a breakfast that consisted mostly of salmon chips and coffee, Peter found himself lying on the pull-out bed and staring at the ceiling for the second time in twelve hours. It was bright outside, but if he squinted, he imagined he could still see that green streak of neon on the white plaster.

Rita carefully wrapped what had looked like a scrap of fabric around his head like bandanna, chatting aimlessly about *The Great Martian Bake Heist*.

The material of the THEIA Mind was stiffer than most fabrics, or at least all the fabrics Peter could remember coming into contact with. To be fair, that did not make for a particularly long list. It was slightly

warmer than his skin temperature, and felt disconcertingly tacky where it touched his temples.

Something like nausea crawled in his gut.

Next to him, Juno hovered nervously, fluttering like a distressed moth.

“If you need us to stop for any reason –” he said, in a quiet, intense tone of voice that made Peter feel … something he didn't have the time nor hope to unravel right now.

“Um, boss,” Rita piped up from where she sat perched on the kitchen counter, “we can't actually stop it once it's started?”

Somehow, Juno managed to hover with an even stronger degree of intensity. Rita gently hit him with a pillow to make him stop.

Peter took a deep breath.

Perhaps he should be scared of what might happen.

Perhaps he should be scared of the person he might turn out to have been.

And he *was*. He *was* scared, but –

Lying on Rita's couch, looking up at the ceiling with the weight of Juno's body beside him, what he felt most of all was –

Excitement, perhaps.

The anticipation of not being the only person in the game with no cards to play or bluff about not having.

Whatever sins he might have committed, it would be worth remembering if only so that he was not unprepared if anyone ever came to collect.

Besides, he was *curious*. And if the person he had been was the sort of person that Juno Steel might care about … perhaps he would be a person worth being.

“No time like the present,” he said smoothly.

“All right,” said Rita. “Patching you in now, Mistah Glass. It'll, uh, *probably* hurt at first, because the nanochips need to connect and adjust to your neural pathways, but after that it should be smooth

sailing. You're gonna be under for most o – ”

Without warning, the world exploded into bright, screaming light, tearing into his skull like jagged teeth. Rita was still talking, but he couldn't make out what she was saying; the words were blurring together,

drowning out in the rush of blood in his ears, and pain

like a sound was blaring through him, pouring

into his bones like a thousand tiny insects,

and he couldn't

see –

-

And then it was quiet.

Peter opened his eyes.

He felt, for the first time in a very long time, exactly like himself.

Blinking blearily, he took a moment to take in his surroundings. He was still lying on Rita's pull-out couch. Someone had draped a blanket over him. An episode of *Haunted Ice Road Hunters: Eris* was playing softly on the holovid screen. The world outside Rita's kitchen window was dark.

He sat up. The THEIA Mind slid down into his lap.

"How are you feeling?" Juno asked from behind him.

The sound of his voice was like a fist to the gut. It left Peter embarrassingly breathless.

He turned around, muscles screaming in protest.

Juno and Rita were sitting next to each other by the kitchen counter, elbows touching and eyes wide. They looked nothing alike, but in that moment, they could have passed for siblings.

Peter stared at them.

It felt different with full context, seeing them.

It felt *different*. An ocean to a lake; a rainbow to a single shade of color.

Juno's mouth was a tight line. His fingers were tapping against the countertop. Peter was fairly sure he didn't realize he was doing it.

"Hello, Juno," he said, and his voice was cracking, bleeding fondness into every syllable.

Juno's fingers stilled. He rolled his eyes, but he couldn't keep the smile off his face. "*Oh, I remember everything now, Juno, thank you for asking*," he said, in a horrible impression of Peter.

"You really have no flair for the dramatic, Detective," Peter said.

Juno gave a sharp bark of laughter, and then he was crying.

Peter swallowed, though it was difficult. “Juno,” he said, though he didn’t know what to say next.

“Boss,” Rita said awkwardly, and gestured at a stack of papers in front of her.

“What?” Juno blinked wetly at her. “Oh. Right. Yeah.”

He wiped his face and gave a final sniffle.

Then Rita launched into a list of diagnostic questions, and they spent the rest of the evening – or was it night? Peter found himself unable to tell – going through them, cut off only by the occasional tangent about one of Rita’s shows.

Some of the answers he had to make up.

Secret identities and memory loss were a bad mix, as it turned out.

“Tell me, Rita,” Peter said afterwards, throat sore from talking, “did I pass?”

“Looking good, Mistah Glass,” Rita said, beaming.

“Excellent,” Peter murmured, and promptly passed out.

-

The next time he awoke, the room was grey with predawn light. Juno was curled up on the bed next to him. He was lying on his side, above the covers, back turned toward him. Peter stared at the solid line of his shoulder for what felt like hours.

Then he carefully pushed himself off the mattress.

The streak of neon green on the ceiling looked like an arrow pointing forward.

“Going somewhere?” Juno asked from behind him.

“Just getting some air,” Peter said. He hadn’t known where he was going until he said it.

Juno rolled off the bed and stood up. His pants had shifted while he slept; they hung low on his hips. “Mind if I join you?”

“Be my guest,” said Peter. He tore his gaze away from the exposed patch of skin between Juno’s shorts and t-shirt and went to steal Juno's beat up old sneakers.

“*Hey*,” Juno said, affronted, but his mouth twitched just enough to give him away.

“I think you will find that possession is nine tenths of the law, Detective,” Peter said, smirking.

“Didn't know you went to law school, Nureyev,” Juno grouched.

Nureyev. There it was, with full context, the sweetest endearment and his past laid bare all at once, all in three syllables.

“You know,” he said conversationally, as Juno pulled on his coat, “The University of Valles Marineris experienced the loss of some of their oldest and most valuable law texts about a decade ago.”

“*What*,” Juno said.

Peter grinned at him. “Shall we go up to the roof, Juno?”

They went out into the narrow hallway and up and up the stairs, and then Peter pushed the fire escape door open and they were standing outside, watching the city smog tint pink and red and vivid purple, Juno in his beat-up coat and Peter in Juno's shoes and Juno’s shorts and Juno's shirt that said GIRL BOSS in bright, bold letters.

The air smelled like smoke and hot dogs.

They went over to the railing on the edge of the building and stood and watched and watched and watched the city wake up on the streets below them, and then Juno sighed and shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his coat.

“Okay,” he said awkwardly. “We need to talk.”

A lady could twist himself apart with a posture like that.

“I believe we came to that conclusion last night, yes.”

Juno shifted on his feet. “How did Dark Matters get you? I thought you were leaving.”

Ah. Peter crossed his arms, leaning against the railing.

“I had an unburned Dark Matters identity, and I saw an opening for a quick break before I left,” Peter said. He remembered it now: Poring over security systems and approximate floor plans, the too-late realization that his cover had been compromised, and the chase that followed. Being outgunned, outmanned, and overrun four feet away from his exit. “Clearly, I'd overestimated my window of opportunity. I suppose they felt I was too much of a potential resource to liquidate immediately.”

“What,” Juno said, scowling.

“Who helped you get me out?” Peter asked, sidestepping it. “Other than your wonderful secretary, of course.”

Juno gave him a look that made it clear he knew exactly what Peter was doing. “Burned a friend over it,” he said. “Agreed to work for another … well. I'm not sure friend is the word for that guy, but we made a deal.”

Peter was no stranger to deals with people of … varying levels of moral integrity, but the idea of Juno making a deal with some third party for *him* – it sat poorly with him. “Juno...”

“He's giving me an eye,” Juno said, with a humorless little laugh. “He's helped me get you back. As far as debts goes, that's a hell of a lot on the scale.”

“We can leave,” Peter said, and for a split second he was both this Peter Nureyev and the Peter Nureyev of the night after Miasma, overlapping. He shivered despite himself.

Juno seemed to feel it too, that sudden echo. He smiled, self-depreciating and without a shred of humor. “Didn't manage it the first time, Nureyev.”

The memory of it – of their night together, of waking up to an empty bed, of hearing the door close from the other side of the room – lodged cold and painful in his gut, catching on his entrails.

“You managed leaving well enough,” he pointed out. Juno flinched.

“I should have talked to you,” he said quietly, staring down at his bare feet. “I just couldn’t – I still don’t know if I can…”

He trailed off, unable to finish the sentence, stumbling like he was learning a new language. Peter thought of Juno apologizing in a

crowded coffee shop, of Juno wiping the blood from Peter's face, of Juno –

"It's alright," Peter said, so quietly he could barely hear himself.

"It's not," Juno spat, like he had to get the words out or they would choke him. "You *know* it's not. You trusted me and I said I would stay, and I *left* you and I thought that meant I could pretend you didn't exist, but I kept seeing you everywhere, all the time, and then I *actually* saw you and you were … you were hurt, and I should have been there to keep it from happening, but I *wasn't*, and then you got captured and it got worse and I didn't know if I had lost you for good, and I –"

Peter pulled him into a hug. Juno went quiet with a sharp intake of breath. After a beat, he returned the hug, holding Peter tight. His nose dug into the spot beneath Peter's collar bone.

"You came back," Peter murmured into his hair. "To *The Emerald Bough* and Dark Matters."

"Yeah, well," Juno muttered. "That's not…"

He trailed off, absentmindedly stroking the side of Peter's neck with the broad side of his thumb.

"Hmm," Peter hummed, unable to keep from smiling.

They stood there for a while, holding and being held.

"You know," Peter said. Neither of them had spoken for some time. Above them, the sky was turning blue. "They had me looking into Grim's mask. And the Egg of Purus."

Juno pulled back to frown up at him. "What?"

"I suspect they were trying to see if their conditioning could take it," Peter said. "I suppose they must have gotten enough out of me to know what points to put pressure on before they made me believe I was *really* Rex Glass."

The thought made him a little sick. He didn't want to think about what else they may have learned from him.

He would have to, of course.

For now, he thought, it could probably wait.

Juno was still studying him, face serious. He was, still and as always, in every returned and stolen memory, the most beautiful person Peter had ever seen. “How are you doing?”

Peter took a moment to consider it. He worried his fingers over a rough seam on the back of Juno’s coat. “You know,” he said, carefully casual, “before all this, I would have said my … that Peter Nureyev was a weakness.”

Juno made an affronted sound, but refrained from commenting, which was testament to the gravity of the situation, Peter supposed.

“I confess,” he continued, “that I sometimes thought that if I could just … wipe that slate clean, if I could somehow leave Peter Nureyev behind … it would have been better. *I* would have been better.”

“That’s bullshit,” Juno muttered, jaw tight and mouth twisting into a scowl. It made Peter feel hopelessly, desperately fond.

“It turns out not having all the information is a terrible idea when you break the law for a living,” he said.

“*That’s* your problem?” Juno looked so offended that Peter had no choice but to laugh.

“No,” he said. “Well, yes. But –”

He felt like a person.

He felt like a real person. Someone with a long, hard history and a mountain of mistakes, surface weathered and worn, if not smooth, then at least *familiar*.

Starving in a back alley; stabbing a man who was not his father but who may as well have been in a dark server room; running long cons and short cons and disappearing; stopping a grouchy detective from escaping out of the window of his office.

Every fractured, ill-fitting piece of him.

Every part of him was *his*.

Juno was frowning expectantly at him.

“The, ah, other parts may have been more important than I expected,” Peter said awkwardly. He coughed. “As well.”

“Do you want to elaborate on that?” Juno asked, raising an eyebrow.

Peter swallowed. “I only realized what I had when I remembered that I had lost it,” he wanted to say, though it sounded unforgivably trite even in his own thoughts, or, “I spent months staring at walls and eating terrible ready-made dinners until you broke me out of it and made me realize that there was more, that I had forgotten how to be a person that was more than paperwork and empty air.”

He didn’t have the words for it yet.

“Thank you,” he said instead, “for giving me back to myself.”

Juno looked away. “It was the right thing to do.”

“It was a good thing to do,” Peter said. He could practically feel Juno’s face heating up.

“Yeah,” Juno mumbled, “well…”

Peter’s heart squeezed painfully in his chest. He swallowed thickly.

“First rule of thieving,” he said, and couldn’t help but grin at how hard Juno rolled his eye. “Hold on to what you have.”

Then he pulled Juno closer and kissed him.

End Notes

Thank you so much for reading!
The art post is here!
As always, you can find me on tumblr @aibari.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!